

ST GREGORY PALAMAS AND ELDER SOPHRONIOS OF ESSEX¹

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St. Gregory Palamas is one of the most important Orthodox theologians of the fourteenth century and one of the most notable Fathers of the Church. Elder Sophrony is one of the most important theologians of experience in the twentieth century and one of the most notable Fathers of the contemporary Orthodoxy. Saint Gregory Palamas had to deal with the intellectualist theology of Barlaam of Calabria and his supporters. Elder Sophrony had to deal with the contemporary Western theology and the wider challenge of secularism.

Elder Sophrony used to say that, without the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas, we cannot meet the great challenges of our times. Today, we could say that, without Elder Sophrony's teaching about the person, we cannot meet the even greater challenges of our own times. The teaching of Elder Sophrony on the person repeats and renders in contemporary language the teaching of Saint Gregory on the deification of man.

Saint Gregory Palamas met the important challenge of Christian humanism that questioned the quintessence of the Church as a community of deification, through his proposal that man's deification needs the uncreated energy of God. Elder Sophrony met the contemporary challenges of secularization and globalization that crush persons and annihilate communal life, through the hypostatic principle and man's calling to include in him all human existence and all Being.

Saint Gregory and Elder Sophrony didn't present new theological truths that were not existent previously in the Holy Bible and the Tradition of the Church. Through their use of language, terms and concepts of their age, they met challenges and attacks against the Christian faith with timeless truths of the Church Fathers and their personal way of life. Their shared purpose is to defend the truth about the renewal and deification of man in Christ.

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A key element in the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas is the distinction between divine essence and divine energy. This distinction that has its roots in the Holy Bible was developed theologically in the Fathers of Cappadocia. Saint Gregory Palamas used this distinction to support the uncreated character of divine energy. This distinction does not introduce a theological innovation, but it is just a theological reworking of a patristic and theologically familiar concept. Every nature has its respective energy. Created nature has created energy, while the uncreated one has uncreated energy. God doesn't remain incommunicable to man and neither does he communicate with him by using created mediums, but he comes into direct and personal communication with him via his uncreated energy. In this way, man takes part personally in the divine life and becomes god by grace. Palamite theology defends the truth of this renewal and deification of man in Christ, that is to say, of his becoming as a person in God's likeness (*καθ' ὁμοίωσιν Θεοῦ*).

Elder Sophrony used a similar approach. He used the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas, and especially the distinction between divine essence and divine energy, in order to speak boldly and in a cataphatic way about how to approach God. According to Elder Sophrony, Saint Gregory Palamas explained to us how to stand in front of God, how to know Him in a cataphatic way (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 19-11-1989). God's energy, as Elder Sophrony receives it from Palamas, "is the living God" (*ὁ ζῶν Θεός*). Elder Sophrony notes that with God's energy we experience the living God as He is accessible to human existence (*βιώνουμε τὸν ζῶντα Θεό προσιτό στό ἀνθρώπινο εἶναι -ibid*).

The exclusive use of *apophaticism* disconnects theology from ascetic life, transforming it into some kind of ideology. Apophatic theology should not be used for the elimination or reduction of the *cataphatic*, but as a complement to it and for lifting human existence to its full potential in its union with God. According to Saint Gregory Palamas, apophatic theology is not opposite nor does it nullify the cataphatic, but it indicates as true what is said in a cataphatic way about God and accomplishes this in pious way, because we are not the same as God (*Ἡ ἀποφατική θεολογία οὐκ ἐναντιοῦται, οὐδὲ ἀναιρεῖ τὴν καταφατικήν, ἀλλὰ δείκνυσι τὰ καταφατικῶς ἐπὶ Θεοῦ λεγόμενα ἀληθῆ μέν εἶναι καὶ εὐσεβῶς λέγεσθαι ἐπὶ Θεοῦ, οὐ καθ' ἡμᾶς δὲ ταῦτ' ἔχειν τὸν Θεόν -Κεφάλαια ἑκατόν πενήκοντα 123; Χρήστου, 1992, p.104*).

Elder Sophrony similarly observes that the ultra-zealous followers of apophatic theology, in most of the cases, run the risk to accept their noetic, or even their philosophical theory about the inaccessibility and the incomprehensibility of God as the utmost perfection. Many of them tend

even to claim that the view of the Uncreated Light is less than what men can see in the “Cloud of Unknowing” (*γνόφος ἀγνωσίας*). According to their limited abilities of perception the “Cloud of Unknowing” is the highest state human mind (*νοῦς*) can reach, when it is engaged in theology (Αρχιμ. Σωφρόνιος, 2011, pp.299-300). The harmonic synthesis of cataphatic and apophatic theology inside the true perspective of unification with God was introduced by the teachings of the early Fathers of the Church, and fully adopted by Saint Gregory Palamas and Elder Sophrony.

Following the spirit of the Palamite texts, Elder Sophrony spoke in contemporary language and used a different terminology; one that is more familiar to us today. Personhood or, to be more precise, *hypostasis* plays a key role in his theology, which he considers richer in meaning and more appropriate to deliver the true Christian teaching. He mentions *hypostatism* (*ὑποστατισμός*) and not personalism (*περσωναλισμός*), introducing the concept of *hypostatic principle* (*ὑποστατική ἀρχή*). He notes that the hypostatic principle, which characterizes the Triune God, also exists as a possibility (*ἐν δυνάμει*) in man who is created according to God’s image (*κατ’εἰκόνα Θεοῦ*); in order for his likeness to lead him to his Creator, his whole theology ultimately results in the defence of the same truth; the truth of man’s elevation to *hypostasis* or person exists in God’s likeness (*καθ’ὁμοίωσιν Θεοῦ*), which again is the road to his deification (Αρχιμ. Σωφρόνιου, 7-8-1989).

The theology of the person or hypostasis, in the way that is presented by Elder Sophrony, presupposes the teaching regarding the uncreated energies of Saint Gregory Palamas. This teaching, that has been passionately criticised by Barlaam of Calabria and his followers, draws also today the arrows of heterodox theologians without leaving uninfluenced also some Orthodox. The polemic against the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas in our age necessary entails a polemic against the teaching of Elder Sophrony.

In his polemic against Barlaam, Saint Gregory Palamas, while criticising the mistaken belief regarding the created character of the divine energies, also noted the need for emphasising the role of personhood. Adopting almost word for word what exists in Saint Gregory the Theologian’s writings, Palamas claims that God, in His communication with Moses, didn’t say “I am the essence” but He said: “I am who Is”; because it is not through essence that being comes to exist, but through being essence comes to be; and He is the One who subsumed all being in Himself (*Καί τῳ Μωυσῇ δέ χρηματίζων ὁ Θεός, οὐκ εἶπεν ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ οὐσία, ἀλλ’ ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν [Exodus. 3,14]· οὐ γάρ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας ὁ ὢν, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ ὄντος ἡ οὐσία· αὐτός γάρ ὁ ὢν ὅλον ἐν ἑαυτῷ συνειληφε το εἶναι -Υπέρ τῶν*

ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων 3, 2, 12; Χρήστου, 1962, p.666; also see Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος* 45, 3; PG 36,625C).

The elevation of essence to the status of being implies that being is against essence, which ultimately would mean the existence of being without essence. This mistake was noted recently in theological debates while discussing the concept of the person and some referred to the above cited verse from Saint Gregory Palamas to solve the problem. If we follow Saint Gregory Palamas here, we can avoid essentialism, which the Orthodox theologians correctly dismiss, but there is still the fear that we may embrace in its place personalism. This personalism is totally foreign to the Patristic tradition and to the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas. As Saint Gregory Palamas emphasizes, we can distinguish hypostasis from essence and we can present hypostasis' difference from essence, but we cannot find a hypostasis without an essence (*οὐκ ἔστιν ἰδεῖν ὑπόστασιν χωρίς οὐσίας* -*Πρός Γαβριᾶν* 30; Χρήστου, 1966, pp. 358-359). Divine hypostases are not parts of divine essence, because in each hypostasis exists the whole and perfect divinity (*ὅλη καὶ τέλεια ἡ θεότης* -*Πρός Παῦλο Ἀσάνην*, 9; Χρήστου, 1966, p. 371).

Elder Sophrony discusses these Palamite Triadological Antinomies in his work “The unity of the Church in the image of the Holy Trinity” (*Ἡ ἐνότητα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας κατ’ εἰκόνα τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος*; Αρχμ. Σωφρονίου, 2010b, p. 105 and after), as the key for an Orthodox understanding of what is a person. He believes that this Palamite discussion can safeguard the Orthodox theological thought from any deviation towards essentialism or personalism.

Elder Sophrony insists that outside the three divine hypostases no divine essence can exist, but he also notes that neither any divine hypostasis can exist without divine essence. Divine essence is not ontologically prior neither it is more foundational than divine hypostasis. In addition, divine hypostasis cannot precede divine essence. Hypostasis and essence in God are one and the same. Between them there is no antithesis. This was clearly expressed with the revelation that was given to Moses: “I am”. Or put differently “I am Being”, “The One Who is, I am”... This identity is presented as a form of an extreme antinomy, due to the fact that the principle of divine hypostasis, because of its Triadic unity, cannot be reduced to an abstract divine essence. The simple and one Being, the Holy Trinity, reveals a unity of a totally different kind (Αρχμ. Σωφρονίου 2010b, pp. 127-128). It is impossible to explain the divine hypostases just as some kind of “relations” inside divine essence. Hypostasis is the one “pole” or the one “aspect” of the one Being. His other “pole” or His other “aspect” is Essence (ibid, pp. 128-129).

These comments offered by Elder Sophrony, that clearly define the frame within which the Theology of the Person or Hypostasis was developed by Saint Gregory Palamas and the Fathers of the Church, have a crucial importance for the correct approach of man as a person. Significant misconceptions that were recently supported in the debates of Orthodox theologians on personhood would have been avoided, if Elder Sophrony's comments were taken into consideration.

But, at the same time, it must be noted that, whereas in divinity there is no antithesis between essence and hypostasis, in humanity something different is observed. Here we have to observe a serious antithesis between essence and hypostasis, which is most tragic. The person is indeed in antithesis with his nature and his will in antithesis with his actions (see on this issue *Rom.* 7,15 and after). This is manifested in the experience of everyday life, which led some to support that man must conquer his nature and be released from it. But Orthodox Christian anthropology is against this view. As in divinity, in the same way in humanity, which is created in God's image, there is no antithesis between essence and hypostasis. The antithesis, which is indeed manifested in action, is due to deviation; it is due to the human non natural mode of existence.

Human nature was created in relation and reference to the divine nature. We were created, notes Saint Gregory Palamas repeating Apostle Peter, so that we might be partakers of divine nature (*ἵνα γενώμεθα θείας κοινωνοί φύσεως*; see *2 Pet.* 1,4). This means, as he himself adds, that we were not previously joined with divine nature neither we were created as partakers of this nature (*Θεοφάνης*, 15; *Χρήστου*, 1966, p.239). And while man had to move consciously and willingly towards the "in the likeness" (*καθ' ὁμοίωσιν*), not only he has not done so, but he even walked in the opposite direction, embracing evil as his second nature. This double deviation was caused due to man's pride. This is what alienated him from the life of virtue which was according to his nature and led him to an unnatural, spiteful and evil life. However, when man humbles himself and regains his natural reference towards God, then the antithesis that exists in him is lifted, he becomes at peace and lives the virtuous life that is according to his true nature (*Πρός μοναχὴν Ξένην*, 54; *Χρήστου*, 1992, p. 222).

So man is not called to conquer his nature or to be freed from it, but to go against its deviation, to conquer its passions and to direct it to the purpose for which he was created: to the likeness (*στό καθ' ὁμοίωσιν*), to the communion with the divine nature (*θείας φύσεως*). Through this perspective, man is called to fight against his flesh and hate his own self (*Luk.* 14,26). Through this perspective, the goals and methods of Christian

ascesis are explained and achieved, which constitute the central axis in the life and the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas and Elder Sophrony. And because pride was the cause of man's deviation, therefore mourning and humbleness are highlighted as the main medicine in order to set him in the right path again.

Saint Gregory Palamas, as Saint Philotheos (Kokkinos), Patriarch of Constantinople, his biographer and eulogist notes, had utmost humility and genuine love from the heart (*ἐκ καρδίας ἀγάπην*); he had deep compunction, mourning and ever flowing tears (Philotheos of Constantinople, *Λόγος εἰς ἄγιον Γρηγόριον Παλαμᾶν*, PG 151, 569AB). This humility, which resembles Christ's humility, according to Elder Sophrony, and which constitutes the other side of His love, is proposed as the only way towards the fulfillment of man and his likeness to Christ (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου 2010a, p.32 and p.89). In addition to compunction, mourning and tears, *ascesis* has a dominant position in the teaching of Elder Sophrony and brings back to memory the respective teaching and life of Saint Gregory Palamas.

Finally, the ceaseless prayer of the heart, which Saint Gregory Palamas defended with strength against the attacks of Barlaam, gained a key importance in the life and writings for Elder Sophrony (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 2009a). For Saint Gregory Palamas and Elder Sophrony, the Jesus prayer [Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, the sinner] is not recommended only for monks, but it is recommended for all faithful. It is indeed noteworthy that Elder Sophrony's mention of Saint Silouan's constant will to pray for the whole world, is reminiscent of Saint Gregory Palamas' earlier (by six centuries) comment (in his "Homily on the Introduction of the Theotokos to the Temple") that Theotokos is praying for the whole world (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 19–3–1990; and 2003, p.488; Γρηγορίου Παλαμᾶ, *Ὁμιλία* 53, 39; Οἰκονόμου, 1861, p.177)

Man's deification or, in other words, the elevation and fulfillment of his hypostatic principle, is the result of a long and painful ascetic life. But the achievement of virtue and the cleansing of our senses, our minds and our hearts, through continuous *ascesis* restore peace in the soul of the faithful, as Saint Gregory Palamas writes, and they transform the tears of mourning and of repentance into joy and elation of the heart. Man then is freed from every earthly passion and tastes the divine blessedness (*Πρὸς μοναχήν Ξένην*, 54-60; Χρήστου, 1992, pp.221-224). In this charismatic state, as Elder Sophrony affirms, there is no need for further *ascesis*. The abundance of divine grace invalidates all natural laws. All events in human life take a positive character, free from internal conflicts (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 2010a, p.212).

Saint Gregory Palamas writes that the man who is filled by the uncreated light hears and sees the invisible (*διακοῦει καὶ ὁρᾷ τὰ ἀθέατα*), becomes an earthly angel of God and brings with himself the whole of creation unto God, because he partakes of everything and he refers the whole of creation to God, who is above all, in order for his image to be an accurate description of his true ontology (*..ἄγγελος ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄλλος ἐπὶ γῆς Θεοῦ γεγονώς καὶ δι' ἑαυτοῦ πᾶν εἶδος κτίσεως αὐτῷ προσαγαγών, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτός ἐν μετοχῇ τῶν πάντων, καὶ τοῦ ὑπὲρ τὰ πάντα δὲ μεταλαγχάνει νῦν, ἵνα καὶ τό τῆς εἰκόνος ἀπηκριβωμένον ἦ -Πρὸς μοναχὴν Ξένην 59; Πρὸς Ἰωάννην καὶ Θεόδωρον τοὺς φιλοσόφους 18; Χρήστου, 1992, p. 224 καὶ p. 239; also, Ἀντιρρητικός πρὸς Ἀκίνδυνον 7, 11, 36; Χρήστου, 1970, p. 488).*

Here we have intact the core of the teaching of Elder Sophrony about the man-hypostasis. Every hypostasis, notes Elder Sophrony, is placed in a specific natural environment, which is gradually revealed and becomes the developmental context for the given hypostasis. Likeness to God exists in man's hypostatic principle as its most inherent developmental condition. The created human hypostasis is called to include in it not only all of humanity and the whole of creation, but also the whole of the fullness of divine and human being (evidenced in Christ) by divine grace, bringing Christ in the praying heart, without man becoming god for the rest of the rational creatures (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου 2010a, p.251, p.257 and p.270). This is the quintessence of the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas and Elder Sophrony on the deification of man.

At this point, we should note the importance of this position for the right theological approach to the contemporary ecological crisis. This crisis is not superficial neither can it be treated only with legal measures and a change in the external behavior of man. The ecological crisis is caused by the inner crisis of man, and the disengagement of the mind from his heart. It springs from man's failure to embrace with love the whole of creation and to refer creation and himself unto God. The ecological crisis begins from the crisis of man as a person, as hypostasis. And the pollution of the environment reflects the inner pollution of man; the pollution in his mind and in his heart. Without the cleansing of heart from the spiteful dispositions and of the mind from the spiteful thoughts, it is not possible for man to have the right relationships with the world. If man doesn't start with the crisis that exists in himself, he cannot solve the ecological problem. The renewal of the world presupposes the renewal of human hypostasis.

Saint Gregory Palamas' life shows in a practical way the truth of his teachings about the deification of man. It is characteristic that, although he

had written about *hesychia* (silence/quietness) motivated from his observations regarding the life of some of his fathers and brothers in Christ, he never dared to write about *theosis* (deification). Only when the need arose, because of the attacks of Barlaam, he decided to speak, knowing again that an accurate description of the process of deification with human words is impossible: because it remains unknown to all who do not have experience of it (*καί λεγομένη ἄρρητος ἐκείνη μένει, μόνοις ἐνόνημος... τοῖς εὐμοιρηκόσιν αὐτῆς -Υπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων* 3, 1, 32; Χρήστου, 1962, p.644). But again, he avoided, because of his humility, to present publicly experiences of spiritual revelations, which he must have had in abundance.

Elder Sophrony, in a similar fashion, also avoided making public experiences of spiritual revelations. But when he came to the end of his life and he was very old, while he was day and night fatigued from his bodily afflictions and when he experienced the burden of the criticism of men, he decided to open his heart. Participating in the tragedy of the sufferings of millions of people, who are spread all over the face of the earth bearing their own burdens of sin and affliction, he wrote and delivered sermons, so that he can help at least some of them deal with their temptations and face them more courageously (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 2010a, p. 12).

Saint Gregory had the blessing to be born and raised in a family that was struggling for holiness. All the members of his family had evident attributes of holiness, which were cultivated further by him and were peaked in his person. The unusual *ascesis*, the ceaseless prayer, the unceasing tear, his unwavering dedication to the Orthodox faith, the ceaseless struggle for the truth, peace and justice, the complete poverty, the great humility, the boundless love and at the end the experience of the presence of the uncreated light were the key characteristics of his personality. He is the man that lived *theosis* already from this life. He is a true example -according to Elder Sophrony's terminology- of the *man-hypostasis*.

The family of Elder Sophrony did not display the spiritual homogeneity in holiness like the family of Saint Gregory. His mother was faithful and according to the testimony of Saint John of Krostand a "just person". Very pious also was his nanny that had a great influence in his spiritual formation during his childhood. But in general "some diversity of opinions and worldviews" was detected in his household (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου 2009b, p.13 and after). But also himself, despite the great spiritual experiences he had from his childhood, he was attracted for a while in his youth to eastern religions. These reasons combined with the

particular demands of the modern age must have contributed to giving an experiential emphasis in his theology and not have the apodeictic methodology, which Saint Gregory Palamas followed. Referring to his experiences of spiritual revelations, he notes that these were not absorbed immediately from his reason, in the form of his dogmatic consciousness. (*Πέρασαν δεκαετίες πρὶν λάβουν μορφή δογματικῆς συνειδήσεως* -Αρχμ. Σωφρονίου 2010a, p.12). His work “*Ὅψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστὶ*” (*We Shall See Him as He is*) can be considered as one of his most representative, where he presents dogmatic truths of Christianity as he unfolds the “story of his soul” (*ἱστορία τῆς ψυχῆς*; *ibid*, p. 255).

Elder Sophrony, analyzed the concept of hypostasis on the basis of his description of Saint Silouan of Holy Mountain. In Saint Silouan’s person, his hypostasis, he was seeing the deified man, the complete human hypostasis, which embraces with love the whole divine and human existence and keeps it in his heart. This man-hypostasis he exemplified in himself, when he decided to follow Christ, raise his cross and march to Golgotha. He lived as a monk that tried to have only Christ in him; this he said answering in grace the challenge that came from an Athonite monk few weeks before his death. In this way, he lived perfection, as defined by Saint Gregory Palamas, referring to Saint Gregory the Theologian and saying “this is perfection for us, to allow only God within us” (*Τοῦθ’ ἡμῖν ἐστὶν ἡ τελείωσις, τὸ μόνο τοῦ μόνου Θεοῦ χωρητικούς γενέσθαι* - *Ἀντιρρητικός πρὸς Ἀκίνδυνον* 6, 4, 9; Χρήστου, 1970 p.386; also see Saint Gregory the Theologian *Λόγος* 30, 6; PG 36,112B).

But, by having Christ in him, Elder Sophrony also had the whole world in him. As Saint Gregory Palamas, he did not base his anthropology in the philosophical currents of his age. Elder Sophrony and Saint Gregory Palamas based their anthropology on the experience based tradition of the Church, which they lived and have known by themselves from the inside, as its living witnesses and martyrs (*ζωντανοὶ μάρτυρες* -Αρχμ. Σωφρονίου 2010a, p.143). Of course, as we have said, they used the language, the terms and the concepts of their times, as the former Fathers of Church also did. But this didn’t influence the essence of their teaching. On the contrary, the use of these terms and concepts opened new horizons to both theological and philosophical thought.

Academic discussions of the Patristic texts try to find sources and influences. In a similar fashion, there are academic discussions that try to find similar sources and influences in the texts of Saint Gregory Palamas and of Elder Sophrony. Thus, we have available academic studies that stress the platonic or neo-platonic influences in the work of Saint Gregory Palamas, personalistic influences on the work of Elder Sophrony and so

on. Indeed, a superficial reading of their works can easily lead scholars astray in their interpretations. But when someone attempts a more careful reading, the impression that he receives is totally different. The words and the patterns of expression are not identical with the truth that is implied, but they are simple and relative means for an indication towards this truth. And the comprehension of this truth cannot be achieved outside the spirit that is behind these words and expressions.

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